

BY PAUL WERDER

SHADE FOR EVERYONE:

A Leader's Role in Social Justice



I have been given a life of privilege and I have the ability to respond to the social injustice that plagues our planet due to the unsustainable and destructive activities of humanity.

We are creating more sustainable buildings. Our environmentally designed communities are more comfortable using fewer resources. It's a good feeling...a satisfying feeling. Take a moment to feel the beauty of living in more harmony with our natural environment. It reminds me of sitting in the shade, while looking at the most beautiful mountain lake I had ever seen in the wilds of Montana. The shimmering sunlight on the water was stunning and my shady viewpoint was as perfect as it gets.

We live a privileged life. Many of us have had many moments of sitting in the shade. For the most part, our lives have been comprised of one stunning opportunity after another. We are having a wonderful life as they say in the movies. Yet, there's more to our human story. The World Bank tells us that 90% of the world's population lives on \$10 per day and every 6 seconds a child dies from hunger. Our focus on sustainability asks us to focus on our global community. As a planet we are experiencing deep suffering. Social justice is the issue with which we have not known what to do.

My first childhood view of poverty frightened me. I could hardly look at the people involved, and I was relieved when my dad drove us back into "our part of town." I was ten years old and had no way to comprehend why I had so much while others had so little. I am still answering that question today. I know that I am not alone in this.

I've felt much anguish regarding social injustice as I've progressed through life. First, I felt as if I was some-

how to blame. Then I became angry and wanted to save the world. Anger is a legitimate feeling, but my focus was in the wrong place. I had to transform my anger into inspiration. I had to let go of thoughts that went like this, "If the evil, greedy people plundering the world would just wake up and do the right thing, then everyone would be better off. And I could enjoy my life so much more." These thoughts were fruitless. They prevented me from being in reality and discovering who I was.

Much later, I spent time believing that I had earned my prosperity and beautiful home in the woods. I told myself, "I've studied hard and worked even harder while others have not." I was especially ashamed of those sentiments when I finally realized that being a successful professional had been a gift. Everything I had was a blessing that had been given to me. Yes, I had done my part to nurture my opportunities, but the opportunities I was born with did not set me up to live on \$10 a day. My family, my schools, my friends, my employment opportunities – all of it simply came to me for a reason I needed to discover.

After decades of soul searching, my discovery is this: *I have been given to so that I can give.* In spite of seeing myself as an ordinary human being, I was born to be a leader; someone willing and able to help others. I suggest the same is true for you. We are not here to accumulate wealth and comfort beyond what we need. We are here to be of service to our communities, both local and global.

As I began to grapple with leadership, I struggled with my role and the scope of my service. Saving the world is not our responsibility; none of us have the capacity or assignment of single-handedly altering what humanity has done with our planet. Nor is it right to ignore the 90% of our global community for whom mere survival is a struggle. When I looked more deeply at the word ‘responsibility’ I realized the answer to my question was in the word itself. Responsibility means “ability to respond” – *my ability to respond*.

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I discovered my only constructive choice was to ascertain how I could best do my part. Deep within our souls we are not angry or overwhelmed. We simply yearn to do our part. If you feel that longing, you will want to know what’s possible in your own scope of service. I believe this is our next huge challenge and I invite you to take it on squarely with me.

Think of the time when you freely contributed yourself or your money or your work for the sole purpose of helping someone in real need. You extended yourself in a way that allowed you to give more than you thought you could or should give. The recipients’ response warmed your heart. You felt exhilarated, expansive, and alive with satisfaction. I might suggest that this felt even better to you than your own moment of shade by your mountain lake with sunshine sparkling across the water. Think about it.

Why are we here? We have a transformational opportunity when it comes to social justice. We can look at social inequity in the eye and shift our focus from horror to anger to responsibility, and ultimately to opportunity. Giving of ourselves to those in need is an opportunity to cleanse our hearts of our own toxic tendencies to play small. Giving what we can reorients us to look at the traces of selfishness, greed and wasteful consumption that continue to creep into our own personal lifestyles.

We can transform ourselves. We all crave the natural way life was meant to be lived. If we orient our culture around consuming only what we need, sharing and giving, then we will find that this planet has enough shade for everyone. If others do not see this opportunity or are unwilling to look at life this way, we can go first. That’s what leaders do.

We can give to fill our hearts with joyful living. We can confront our own smallness and cleanse our fears and doubts until we trust that our own needs will be cared for when we live up to our highest ideals and values.

How can we know ourselves and discover our own souls if we do not give, and expand ourselves again and again? Let’s turn the world upside down in a good way. All of the holy books call for sustainability and social justice, but this work is not about religion. As leaders, our work is to fill ourselves up with love to the point of overflowing with compassionate inclusiveness. You and I are seeking the moment we affirm the purpose of our existence.

Seize this moment and be a leader who brings about healing for your own humanity – just by responding to injustice with a consciousness that longs to cleanse your heart of limitation. Let’s rid ourselves of our petty complaints, obsessions, laziness and wasted energy. Let’s personally bring another person without privilege into the shade. Let’s feel the joy of doing so. And then we will do it again because it feels so good. Let’s allow the scope of our service to remain a mystery as we take one excellent action after another. Only then will we discover the meaning of our existence. Eventually, others will follow. And ultimately, your world will be blessed with overflowing love, fulfillment, and happiness.



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